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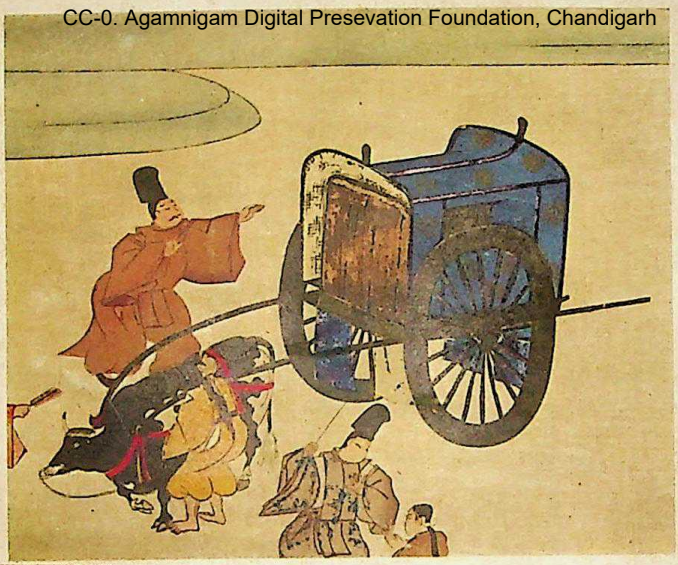

282

Japanese Art

II. HANDSCROLLS

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JAPANESE ART

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JAPANESE ART

HANDSCROLLS

BY

ALAIN LEMIÈRE

II

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The end of the Heian (IXth century) and the Fujiwara (X-XIIth century) period was a time of brilliant civilisation and of great importance in that then the Japanese language was fixed and the first great literary works produced. Moreover these works have never ceased to influence the taste and sensibility of the Japanese, with whom tradition and love of things of the past is a fundamental characteristic. This taste and sensibility is sometimes a little feminine in its feeling for the exquisite (but the other side of the medal shows the magnificent virility of the samurai), which should be no matter for astonishment since the first two prose masterpieces, the *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji) of Murasaki Shikibu, and the *Makura no Soshi* (Pillow Book) of Sei Shonagon, were written by women, by ladies-in-waiting at the court, the cream of refinement.

It is necessary to explain that in the Fujiwara period Chinese influence was so preponderant in aristocratic society that the men used only

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the Chinese language and ideograms in their writings; their highest ambition was to equal Chinese poets and philosophers. So they left it to the women, who were at that time on a footing of equality with the men, much courted and not obliged by fashion to write in Chinese, the care and the responsibility of creating classical Japanese prose. All their grace, freshness and sensibility went into the task, but they could not always avoid a touch of affectation. How could it be otherwise with the attendants on an Empress at the most exquisitely elegant court that has ever existed under the sun? But their naturalness and spontaneity came to their rescue.

So completely was it taken for granted that men had abandoned the domain of prose to the women, that the great poet Tsurayuki had to pretend to be a woman writing for women, when he used the current language and syllabery *(kana)* of his country to describe his travels, so firmly did fashion decree that only women could use them.

It was not until 150 years later, at the beginning of the Kamakura period (end of the XIIth century) that Japanese art in turn escaped from the Chinese embrace and (apart from the specifically Japanese quality in some religious themes already mentioned in vol. I) took on a truly original form. Then there is the flowering of a series of pictures sometimes poetic, sometimes both lyrical and realistic at the same time, or humourous, and typically Japanese in conception and in technique, the makimonos: they were handscrolls

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of paper mounted on silk, several yards long and about a foot to 16 inches broad, the story running the length of the paper.

They are very close in spirit to the prose masterpieces whose episodes they so often illustrate (pl. 2, 5 and 6) with an elegance that rivals the text. For just as the great prose works were written by ladies of the court, so too most of the handscrolls were the work of painters at the court, some of whom even belonged to the illustrious family of the Fujiwara.

An old Japanese proverb asserts that "a poem is a picture with a voice; a picture is a poem without a voice". And could not Sei Shonagon, that lady of the year a thousand who already wrote like one of our impressionist novelists, be described too as a painter

HANDSCROLL OF ANIMALS. XIIth-XIIIth CENTURY.

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of *Yamatoe*, the most purely Japanese school of painting, when for instance she describes a journey in winter by cart drawn by oxen? (pl. 6 and 11).

" Our carriage had no inner curtains and, as the blinds above were drawn right back, the moon's light reached quite down to the bottom. So one could see a lady who wore seven or eight garments, light violet, plum red, white... and over all a dark violet cloak whose striking brightness shone beneath the moon. Beside this delightful being there was a courtier. He wore laced trousers of brocaded cloth (see pl. 7) of vine colour, and several white garments. Stuffs some of golden yellow and some of scarlet hung from his sleeves... As the lady had slid down to hide herself in the bottom of the carriage, the courtier drew her up and led her into the light. She could be seen clearly in all her embarrassment, and every one laughed. " (From the French translation of André Beaujard.)

Such a life of aristocratic luxury and pleasure could only end in tragedy when more virile elements sought to dominate the scene.

The all-powerful Fujiwara regents who for three centuries had left the Emperor no more than a shadow of power, were able politicians, nurtured in intrigue, but no longer men of war. So they could not stand up to the rival clans of Taira and Minamoto, both sprung from cadet branches of the imperial family, who in their distant fiefs had learnt to assemble a new military caste around them, the samurai, broken to arms, freely submitting to an exact-

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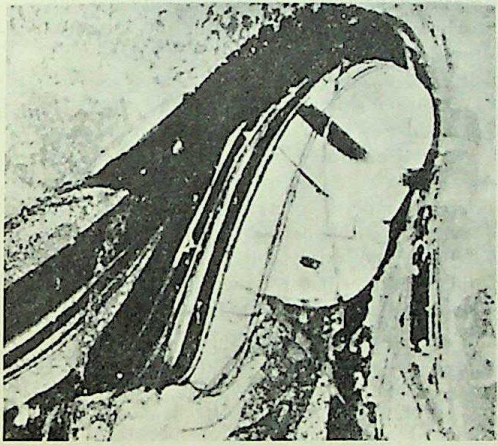
ing moral discipline and living only in the hope that they would one day have the honour and joy of dying in the service of their lord.

There broke out the terrible wars which were to provide the themes for the great Japanese " chansons de geste ". By the battles of Hogen (1156) and Heiji (1160) the Taira first eliminated the Fujiwara (cf. *Heiji Monogatari*, pl. 8) and became in their place Mayors of the Palace or Shoguns. Then, from 1185, the Minamoto, led by the renowned Yoritomo (pl. 12) drove the Taira out in their turn and established at Kamakura, far from the enervating life of the capital, a sort of mili-



GENJI MONOGATARI: COURT LADY. XIIth CENTURY.

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lary dictatorship, the Bakufu of Kamakura.

Meanwhile the Mikado and his court remained at Kyoto, but visits to him were forbidden for the samurais who formed a second military court round Yoritomo, for fear that they might acquire tastes that would blunt their scorn for the things of this world.

I will deal more fully in the next volume with the caste of samurais and their ideals, as also with Zen Buddhism, for it took several centuries for their influence to become felt in the arts. In the XIIIth and XIVth centuries it was still the court at Kyoto, although far fallen from its ancient splendour, that set the tone and inspired the art of the handscroll painters. This art may seem baffling at first sight, but it shows such a sense of life, such beauty and such poetry, that one cannot long resist its charms.

Besides are Velasquez or Rembrandt much easier to understand? And if they had used water colours would they have painted differently from the Japanese who too were led not to peer into the human face in order to discover the secret of the world, but to seek the secret of man through the mystery of things. For whereas oil painting allows of long analyses and many afterthoughts when the artist is bent on fixing the expression of a face or bringing life to a smile, the technique of painting in water colour on silk or paper forbids the slightest retouch, or the smallest addition, makes any correction impossible and betrays the hand's tiniest hesitation. Every stroke of the moving brush, that wonderful

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HANDSCROLL OF RIDERS. XIIIth CENTURY.

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HANDSCROLL OF ANIMALS. XIIth-XIIIth CENTURY.

Chinese brush that responds to every demand, must be made at the very moment when inspiration comes, and must be made with

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that final sureness which can only be attained by long practice in calligraphy with Chinese characters.

Such rapid execution and thin colours, combined with a constant familiarity with characters that are both symbols and pure form, impose the necessity of synthesis and stylisation.

Exact representation of things and beings is never sought: there is no question of reproducing natural shapes, but rather by their means of coming so close to the essential movement of life that the artist's very heart is wedded to its rhythm. Nothing must be copied: everything must be suggested, and those little impersonal commas to which human features are often reduced (pl. 2), far from hindering the life of a scene, add an extra poetry.

No modelling; no shadow even is allowed to mar the lightness of the whole or check the artist's impetus. Besides what in this world, for Buddhist hearts, of illusion where all beings are only vain shadows, could be the significance of the shadow of a shadow?

The perspective too is rather disconcerting: all the scenes are shown as viewed by a bird in flight; houses, partitions, screens and people too being constantly seen at an angle; but just that slant has been chosen that brings out the most poetry. Then there is also the convention known as "taking off the roof" which allows the beholder to dive into recesses and follow the development of the action from one room to another. Then, whenever they are needed, there come conventional

clouds to divide one plane from another, or one scene from another.

It is indeed a different life that is offered to our contemplation. A life nearer to the Marvellous than our poor daily existence. A world of peace and serenity, a foretaste of the Paradise of the Pure Land which can only be reached when we have purged our eyes of a too rational and too utilitarian vision of the world, when having rejected all that is not essential, on us too beings and things cast no shadow.

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LIST OF PLATES

PLATES IN BLACK IN WHITE

I. *Handscroll of animals*, attributed to Toba Sojo, but probably XIIIth Century.

II. *Genji Monogatari*. Detail: Lady of the Court. XIIth Century.

III. *Handscroll of Riders*. Detail. XIIIth Century.

IV. *Handscroll of animals*, attributed to Toba Sojo, but probably XIIIth Century.

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1. *Invalid lady with her faithful cock.*
Painting attributed to Fujiwara Mitsunaga.
XIIth Century.

2. *Genji Monogatari.* Detail: Ladies of the Court.
Handscroll attributed to Fujiwara Takayoshi.
XIIth Century.

3. *Shigizan engi* (Story of Mount Shigi). Detail. The messenger of Bishamonten, dressed in a cloak of swords and running on the Wheel of the Law, brings the Emperor the miraculous sword which will cure him.
Handscroll by an unknown artist.
XIIth Century.

4. *Shigizan engi.* Another detail: Landscape.

5. *Murasaki Shikibu no Nikki* (Diary of Murasaki Shikibu). Detail: Review of boats before the Emperor's visit.
Handscroll attributed to Fujiwara Nobuzane.
XIIth Century.

6. *Murasaki Shikibu no Nikki.* Another detail: Ox cart.

7. *Ban Dainagon:* Story of the Dainagon (high dignitary) Ban no Yoshio who had a gate of the imperial palace set on fire.
Detail: Children fighting in the street.
Handscroll attributed to Tosa Mitsunaga.
End of the XIIth Century.

8. *Heiji Monogatari* (Tale of the wars of Heiji). Detail of a handscroll traditionally attributed to Sumiyoshi Keion. Beginning of the XIIIth Century.

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9. *Akahito, one of the 36 immortal poets of Japan.* Detail of a handscroll attributed to Fujiwara Nobuzane, but more probably of the XIIIth Century.

10. *Ippen Shonin eden.* Life of the priest. Ippen, a wandering buddhist preacher of the XIIIth Century.
Detail of a handscroll by Eni. XIIIth Century.

11. *Sagoromo Monogatari.* Ox cart.
Detail of a handscroll attributed to Tosa Mitsuaki. XIIIth Century.

12. *Portrait of Minamoto Yoritomo,* first Kamakura Shogun.
Painting on silk attributed to Fujiwara Takanobu. XIIIth Century.

13. *Honen Shonin eden* (Life of the priest Honen).
Detail of a handscroll attributed to Tosa Yoshimitsu. XIVth Century.

14. *Fishing with cormorants.*
Picture attributed to Tosa Yukihide.
XIVth Century.

15. *Noe Hoshi eden.* Legend of the monk Noe who obtained leave from the King of Hell to come back to earth to fulfil a vow.
Detail of a handscroll attributed to Tosa Yukinaga. XIVth Century.

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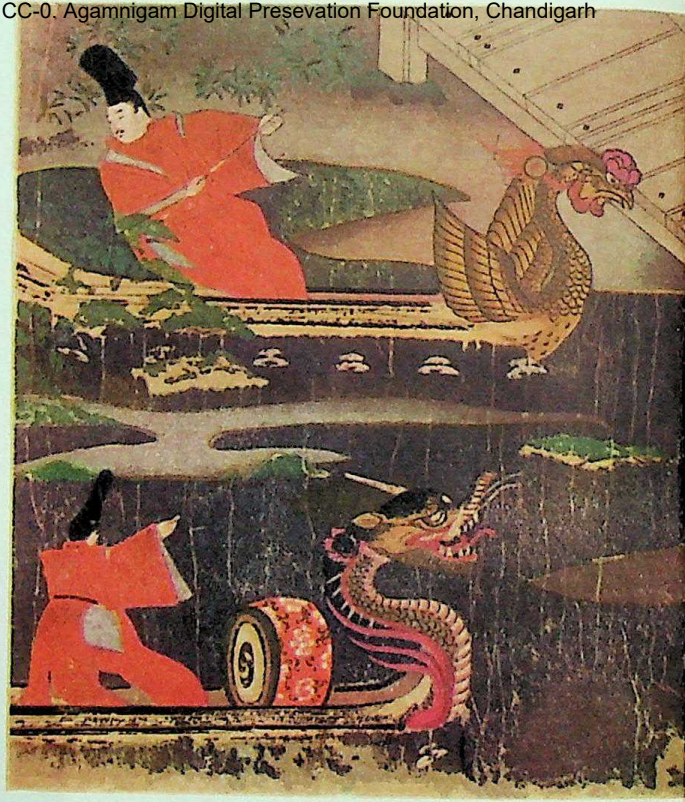

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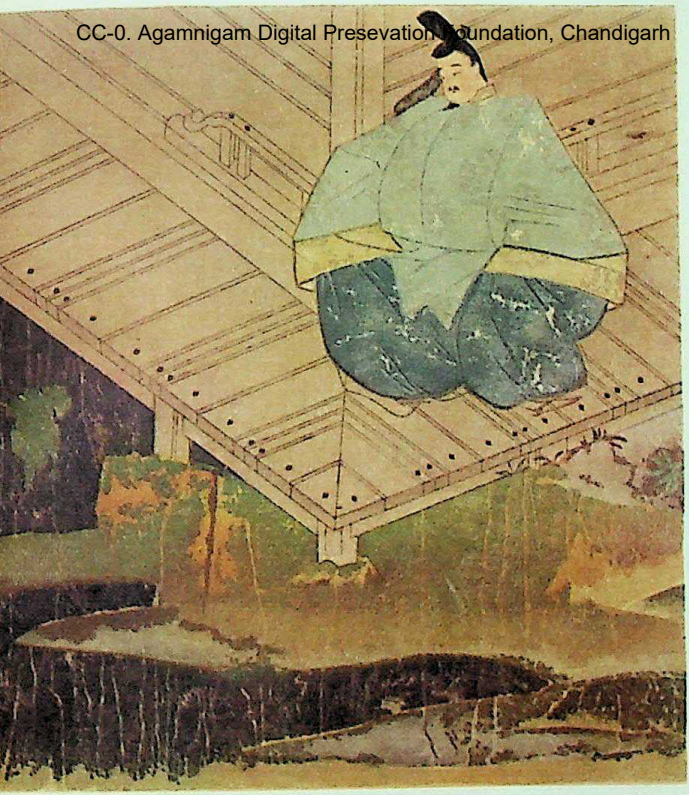

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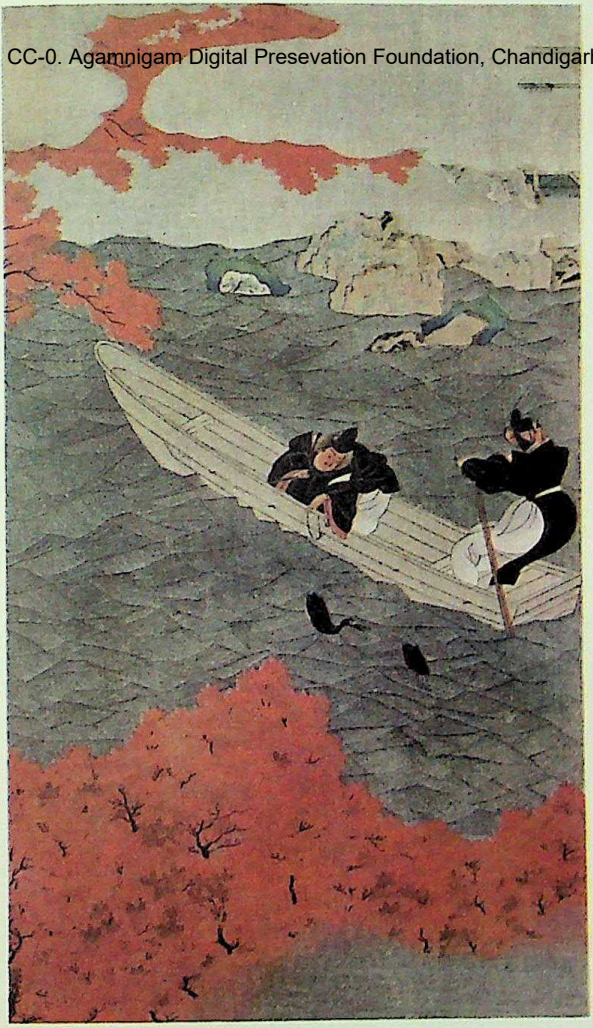

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